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Mitzi Shewmake

THE MAKING OF A BOOK, THAIS

This thesis has been approved by the following committee  
at The Woman's College of the University of North Carolina,  
Greensboro, North Carolina.

by

Mitzi Shewmake

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Helene Thrush  
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## APPROVAL SHEET

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In the fourth century Foreword

In illustrating a novel or play or poem, it is necessary to take two factors into account, the meaning the author has tried to incorporate in his work, and the ideas and feelings the illustrator projects upon the work.

In the play, Paphnutius, by Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, these two factors can be separated more easily than is the case when an artist attempts to illustrate a work that is contemporaneous.

However, because this particular medieval play is based on an earlier legend, the first factor is somewhat complicated, for the author's meaning incorporates ideas that were prevalent in the third century as well as her own of the tenth century.

In the illustrations done for this medieval play I have tried to take into account, at least in part, the changing character of the legend from the third century in Egypt to the tenth century in Gandersheim, as well as the relevance it seems to me that it has today.

The first part of the paper is an attempt to elucidate in some measure the content of the play. The second part is devoted to a discussion of the visual symbols used in the illustrations.

In the fourth century in Egypt the deserts began to attract numbers of Christians seeking asylum from the world. They went singly and in groups to build their cells in the desert. The cells were of stone and rubble, or they were caves or tombs the hermits found empty. The stories of the desert fathers were for the most part written by their contemporaries who came to see what marvels of faith and austerity the desert could produce. Many of these tales were written in Greek and later translated into Latin. Among them is the story of Paphnutius, an anchorite whose vision of the harlot, Thais, led him to Alexandria to save her soul. In Alexandria the hermit disguised himself as a young lover in order to gain admittance to Thais. Because she was a Christian Paphnutius could remind her of the damnation awaiting her for her sinful life. Thais decided to burn her possessions, renounce her present life and follow the hermit who promised to show her the penance she must do in order to obtain pardon from God.

Paphnutius took her to a convent and had her sealed in a little cell where she was to remain and weep for her sins. After which he departed for the desert where his disciples were waiting for him.

Three years later, having no sign from God as to the state of Thais' soul, Paphnutius went to another ascetic to ask him to pray for such a sign. One of the other anchorites then had a vision showing him that Thais had been pardoned. Paphnutius was overjoyed and went to Thais to tell her. She left her cell and within about two weeks was carried to heaven.

The legend, of which I have read one translation which is probably



not the most literal, places the emphasis upon the actions rather than on the characters. It is a story told to show the marvelous forgiveness of God. The personalities involved are secondary.

The story of Paphnutius was well known, as were all of these saintly tales, in the Middle Ages. In 1615 a collection was made of the sayings and lives of the desert fathers, the Vitae Patrum, edited by Rosweyde and printed in Antwerp at the Plantin press.

In the tenth century a play was made from the story of Paphnutius by Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, but far better known are Anatole France's novel, Thais, and Massenet's opera of the same name.

The fourth century in Egypt was a time in many respects like our own. We carry around with us our addenda of knowledge, bits of science and history and psychology, in much the same way that the earliest Christians carried their admixture of pagan beliefs. Many of the first converts to Christianity were Jews, but by the third century many pagans had been baptized as well. With them were incorporated many different beliefs and rituals that almost threatened to engulf the rising church. There was the cult of The Great Mother, Cybele, the cult of Mithra, of Isis, and within these were various splinter groups, each having its own special and mysterious rituals that were for the most part fertility cults. Added to them was Gnosticism, spreading from Egypt the "revealed wisdom of God" which for the initiates meant a belief in a dualism of spirit and matter as well as the hope of a saviour, and above all a key for the initiated that would unlock the gates of heaven. Many of the newly baptized Christians could not at first give up their old beliefs, merely overlaying them with a Christian veneer. After all, there might not seem to be too much difference in cults and rituals that had, in

common, the practice of baptism and a god-hero who could become The Christ.

For the poorer class in Egypt, Roman rule was in the beginning not very different from the Greek. "Greek remained the language of the country in current use for private letters, matters of business, and most of the legal affairs of the inhabitants, including the Romans themselves," says John Garrett Winter in Life and Letters in the Papyri. There were few positions of authority that were not filled by Greeks, or by that time Graeco-Egyptians. But the Egyptian peasant had his land and his half-believed gods and his poverty. This was the background of the desert fathers, most of whom were Egyptians of the poorer classes who fled from the cities and the banks of the Nile to the desert.

The diverse pre-Christian moral and religious behaviour was suddenly given a new and unified purpose in the figure of the Christ preaching to and for the poor who were humble in spirit as well as flesh. But the stronger the church became the more it leaned toward promoting a powerful organizational hierarchy within itself, which may have seemed to many of the earliest converts to depart too far from the simpler teachings of Jesus, where each man could find his own salvation through Christ. This may in part explain the exodus into the desert. But certainly asceticism had its roots in many of the mystery cults as well as in the current philosophical ideas. Then, too, the belief that the second coming of Christ was imminent led at least some of the hermits into their desert cells. They wanted to be ready for the kingdom of heaven.

Helen Wadell, in The Desert Fathers, uses this quotation: "Pachomius, from his monastery of Tabenna in the Nile, had seven thousand men and women living in various congregations under his rule: there were five

thousand monks on Mount Nitria ... and a traveler through Egypt and Palestine about 396 reports the dwellers in the desert as all but equal to the population of the towns."

The desert fathers believed that their rewards came after the death of the body but they were often repaid for their austerities in visions: "I was caught up into heaven, and I saw the glory of God. And I stood there until now, and now I am sent away," quotes Helen Waddell in The Desert Fathers. Their salvation lay in renunciation of the world and of their bodies. They thought that in the turbulence of the world a man could not see his sins but "when he hath been quiet, above all in solitude, then does he recognize his own default" and "Unless a man shall say in his heart, I alone and God are in this world, he shall not find quiet."

The story of Paphnutius and Thais, taken from the point of view of these desert fathers as nearly as it is possible to arrive at some understanding of their thoughts, is very simple and moving. It was an act of the greatest self-abnegation for an ascetic who might have said, as one of the desert fathers did, "The world destroyed Rome, and the monks Scete," to deliberately go to the city of evil, Alexandria, and seek out the epitome of all evil, woman--and a harlot at that, in order to save her and thereby those who would have been her lovers from eternal damnation.

If one sees the epitome of the desert fathers in St. Simeon Stylites, then the tale of Paphnutius and Thais could easily be turned into the Thais of Anatole France in which poor demon-ridden Paphnutius, as a result of his self-denial, becomes so warped and twisted he finally goes mad. Certainly there were unbalanced or neurotic ascetics. But to explain the actions of the desert fathers in Freudian terms is not the only interpretation that has validity today. However, there is no



softness in the story of Paphnutius and Thais, for, as one of the fathers said, "Even so it is written, 'Our God is a consuming Fire' and needs must we kindle the driving fire in us with travail and with tears." The punishment that Paphnutius meted out to Thais was not an unusual one for the anchorites. To be enclosed in a solitary cell for three years was a fate that many of the anchorites demanded for themselves. The same kind of solitary penance was done by St. Mary and St. Pelagia, whose stories are somewhat similar to that of Thais.

Hrotswitha, the author of the play I used for my book, was a Benedictine nun, born about 930. She entered the convent of Gandersheim in Germany whose abbesses already had a history of literary interest. It was perhaps one of the few places that a woman could be free to study and write, and as is obvious from her extant works, Hrotswitha enjoyed the privileges of a library that was not solely religious in nature.

She wrote poems and plays, the latter taken from the lives of the saints. Her purpose in presenting the plays, she says, was to celebrate the "laudable chastity of Christian Virgins, and the glorification of the innocent." She wishes her audience to see "the weakness of woman victorious, and the strength of man overcome, and covered with confusion."

Her plays were in no sense forerunners of the later miracle plays for they were written in Latin for an educated few. The author, in fact, finds it necessary to apologize for taking the elegance of the pagan poets for her models, especially Terence.

The original manuscript of the plays was in the Royal Library in Munich in 1917. In it there was no spacing or paragraphing, no scenes or acts indicated.

The first edition of Hrotswitha's work was published in Nürnberg

in 1501 and illustrated with engravings after the manner of Dürer.

From the point of view of the illustrator there are two additions of note that Hrotswitha made to the earlier story. In that version Paphnutius was shown directly into the harlot's house and into a room where Thais lay upon a splendid couch. When Paphnutius saw her he said, "Let all go out." Thais answered, "There is no one here but God."

These sentences served the writer the purpose of introducing the subject of God so that Paphnutius could get on with his work of salvation. Hrotswitha's characters embroider the simple idea of Paphnutius' wish to be alone with Thais into Paphnutius' speech: "What I have to say is secret. The room must be secret, too, a room that your lovers do not know. Some room where you and I might hide from all the world." Thais' answer here seemed to me significant: "Yes, there is a room like that in this house. No one even knows that it exists except myself, and God." Of course this, too, serves to introduce God, but there is perhaps a significance in the emphasis placed on the secret room, or on the secret place in Thais' heart which on the surface might read simply that Paphnutius wanted to speak to her in a different way from her lovers. He wanted to speak directly to that part of her which was spiritual.

The second and rather unfortunate addition Hrotswitha made was to the disciple's vision of God's forgiveness of Thais. The desert fathers were not given to describing their visions in detail but Hrotswitha, and one can imagine how effective it might be for a play, added a bed with a crown on it and angels hovering around. This, of course, signified for her the death of Thais and her immediate ascent into heaven. But I am afraid that in our secular age, given the character of Thais, we make a wrong assumption about the bed. Needless to say it does not

appear in my illustrations.

There are two main places in the play that lay aside for a moment the mask of simple instruction. When Paphnutius first arrives in Alexandria from the desert and is searching for Thais he says: "I am bewildered by this town. I cannot find my way. Now I shut my eyes and I am back in the desert...." And later when Thais demurs at being shut up in so small a cell where she will have not one "clean sweet spot in which to call upon the sweet name of God." Here the characters become individualized and very human. There are, too, other glimpses into the hearts of the characters, and it is just these that make the play more interesting to illustrate than the more matter-of-fact earlier version of the legend.

In making a book out of Hrotswitha's Paphnutius I have taken certain liberties with the text. The name has been changed to Thais for two reasons. It seems obvious that the play was written as the story of Thais. It is not the life of Paphnutius that is of most import. He was merely the instrument through which Thais' salvation took place. Because the author was so concerned with the acts of women and was writing for women, it seems appropriate to call her play after the name of the heroine. The early legend itself was called Vita Sanctae Thaisis.

Secondly, it recalls the opera and the novel, Thais. Although their version of the character of Paphnutius bears little resemblance to Hrotswitha's, it is precisely this difference I would like to point up.

I have left out what could be called a prologue to the play that Hrotswitha had added to the original. It is a discussion of knowledge that Paphnutius has with his disciples before he first speaks of going to save Thais. It is interesting from the point of view of the education of

a Benedictine nun in the tenth century but does not enhance the play as a dramatic presentation.

Since there were no scenes or acts marked in the original manuscript, the divisions I have made in the illustrated book are put in arbitrarily where, for the sake of the illustrations, I felt they should come.

Some editing has been done in the way of deleting a portion of the speeches that seemed in no way to affect the meaning.

Although for Hrotswitha the play has a happy and most moral ending, it seems to me that from our point of view today it is a tragic one. This is a view that could not possibly have been held in either the tenth or third centuries. For Thais the belief in the dualism of spirit and matter led her to willingly give up one kind of fleshly imprisonment for another so that she might be rewarded after death. Although some of the desert fathers were sustained in their austerities by heavenly visions, Thais was not and one of the most interesting points in the play is the fact that she herself does not know when she has found her salvation. It is through a brother monk's vision that Paphnutius learns that Thais has paid for her sins and will gain her reward in heaven. When he tells her this she says: "Can that be true?" This is perhaps a necessary point of view for Hrotswitha. Her play was written to instruct and enlighten. Thais had committed, in the eyes of a Benedictine nun, the worst of all possible sins. It was bad enough to marry, but at least one could confine the sin, however Thais not only sinned herself but led many other souls to sin. It would have been impossible for such an evil person as this to live in peace and the blessing of God while she was still alive.

One has the feeling in reading the play that the end was foreordained.

There is no other possible result than that which took place. But it was not so because of the interactions of the characters. Thais was a harlot, she must die. Paphnutius was a holy man, he would see to her salvation. When he returns to his desert disciples and describes what has happened, he tells them that Thais' cell is "no wider than a grave" and that is just what it becomes for her. And he knows this from the beginning. For Hrotswitha, this was no tragedy. Thais went directly to God. For us the fact that her repentance seemingly did not touch Thais, herself, is tragic.

Ours has been called, and I think rightly so, a secular age. In America most of us could have no possible understanding of the poverty and lack of freedom that could lead people in general to believe that only in death was there hope for peace or joy. Furthermore, most Christians, even if they do believe in the eternal joys of heaven, do not see them as a reality, and I literally mean see, in the same way that medieval people did.

Hrotswitha and the desert fathers had no doubt that visions of angels, of heaven and the heavenly host occurred and that these visions, far from being merely the product of a neurotic personality, were glimpses of the only truth that was worth living for. In the main, our visions, for we still have them, have changed somewhat. We perhaps call them daydreams and for the most part they are secular, dealing with social events we would like to see happen and which are within the bounds of reality. These are the lesser visions and do not have the power to influence more than the individual concerned. But there are a few indications that visionaries are still "seeing" in a way that can influence a whole segment of the population that is not just a specialized




group. Ray Bradbury's Martian Chronicles, Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception, and Bergman's movie, The Seventh Seal would seem to me to be descriptions symbolic of "revealed truth" as valid today as the saints and Holy Angels that peopled the dreams of the desert fathers. We can no longer use the same characters, but perhaps there is a symbolic thread running throughout.

One of these threads seems to be the quality of color perceived by visionaries. Ezekiel in The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel says in speaking of his vision: "As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps ... and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning." In one of her visions, St. Elizabeth of Hungary speaks of the heavenly host clothed in jewels and gold beyond compare. Ray Bradbury characterizes a Martian house in terms of glass glowing with its own inner light. Huxley, in his Doors of Perception describes his experience after taking mescaline when he looks at the books lining his study walls, "Red books, like rubies; emerald books; books bound in white jade; books of agate; of aquamarine, of yellow topaz; lapis lazuli books." It is not so much that these objects are made of gold, precious stones, etc., but that the quality of their brilliance, although it can never be put into words, can be hinted at by symbolic language. The fire, the emeralds stand for an incomparable and indescribable light.

In my illustrations I have tried to use symbols that would reflect in some measure the essence of the play that without them would become bogged down in the trappings of its outward image. We are not particularly in sympathy with the realistic picture of the ascetic. The desert

fathers were a dirty, smelly, unkempt lot, full of sores and vermin, with eyes red from weeping and sleeplessness. Most of the woodcuts were done before this paper was written and at least one of the symbols used simply appeared automatically before I had consciously tried to find its meaning. This was the circle with the spiral or the flames. It is, of course, a picture of the sun. But, too, it represents perfection. It was, according to Harold Bayley in The Lost Language of Symbolism, the emblem of Creative Motion for the Egyptians, "the whole system of the Universe from the planet to its ultimate particle revolving in the same manner." When the circle becomes a wheel, it can represent part of the chariot of the sun god; the spokes of the wheel are the sun's rays, reflecting divinity, holiness, the perfection of the absolute (which seems to be a possible meaning for the wheel of Ezekiel's vision: "the appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl ... and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel"). The spiral, according to Otto Rank in Art and Artist was a stylization of the snake, an immortality symbol.

The cross did not begin as a Christian symbol. One type of cross, the Egyptian ankh  (crux ansata, key of life) meant regeneration two thousand years before Christ. Its relationship to the Tau cross is shown by the following speculation as to its origin. A T shaped plug was used in the dykes of the Nile and this form came to be a token of power and life. As the key of life it was pictured as an instrument sometimes used for awakening the dead and according to Philip Wheelwright in The Burning Fountain, it was also used to represent life given as a gift. For Christians, however, the cross in its various forms carries the symbolism of death which loomed larger for Catholic Christianity than

the accompanying idea of the resurrection.

In medieval art the cross is often represented as sprouting leaves, which, of course, relates it to the tree of life. In one of the illustrations Thais is pictured in a garden. Here I took the liberty of changing the "secret room" into a garden. This is the garden of life, of purity. The garden where Fra Angelico's Virgin received the Angel of the Annunciation, where the Unicorn of the tapestries rested. A garden, for medieval people, wherein all the flowers looked like jewels; the garden of the Soul within which grows the Tree of Life; Yggdrasill-- the tree under which the three Norns sat; the family tree; the tree of man; even, perhaps Jack's beanstalk and the Christmas tree. In the garden of Eden there were two trees. One bore the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, one was the tree of life. In Symbolism in the Bible and Church, Gilbert Cope speaks of the tree as the symbol of both life and knowledge, and a female symbol as well as an obvious phallic symbol, "very frequently seen associated with the Mother Goddess in one form or another." An evergreen tree in particular is the symbol of life. To the Egyptians a tree must have had a very special meaning in that it meant the proximity of water in a land where there is never any rain, and on the edge of the desert, water was life.

In the woodcut of the garden sits Thais before she was confronted by Paphnutius and the threat of damnation. Here I used palm trees as her symbols. For Thais, although she represents the world and the life of the world to Paphnutius, recalls at the same time that portion within each individual that remains inviolate, the secret part that the world cannot touch. Even she, full of sin, had her secret room known only to God.

Many symbols seem to have two opposite meanings attached to them. The serpent, for instance, which at one time stands for evil, at another may represent wisdom. Water has significance as a symbol for both birth and death according to Cope in Symbolism in the Bible and the Church. It is possible that this is simply stating that any very definite attribute has within it the seeds of its opposite.

Fire by its changing nature represents the life of the spirit. It is closely connected with the sun, for what are the rays of the sun but in a sense the heat or manifestation of the sun reaching out to give warmth and thereby life to the earth? The significance to us of the hearth fire and the altar fire may go back to the cave fire which gave protection to primitive man against the animals at night. The light of the fire means spirit but it, too, has its opposite. Fire destroys, fire sacrifices, and then again is a purifier. The phoenix was burned and then rose renewed from his own ashes.

There seems to be no obvious reason why Thais should have burned her possessions. In another of the stories of the desert fathers, St. Pelagia, in similar circumstances, gave all her worldly goods to the church. For Thais to have merely given her possessions away and followed the holy man was no assurance that she had had a permanent change of heart. But that she burned her things symbolized the death of her old life and her rebirth into a new one.

The format for the book was suggested by the setting of the play. It takes place in Egypt, in the desert. The desert is wide, not high. It is also full of contrasts, there are no gradations of shade and shape. It seemed to me that black-and-white woodcuts should form the background for the text with one color woodcut added only to heighten

the sense of contrast.

The play and the legend are both simple and straightforward without many subtleties of meaning, therefore the illustrations should be unambiguous. The smaller woodcuts were needed to change the rhythm of the shapes made by the rectangles of text with the illustrations of the same size. The desert is not monotonous although it might seem so on one's first acquaintance.

The two full-page woodcuts were used to emphasize the importance of two events which were, in a sense, turning points in the life of Thais: the flames symbolizing her rejection of her old life, and the vision symbolizing God's acceptance of her offering.

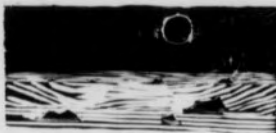
The lettering has been kept simple and plain without the use of initial caps or ornaments. I felt this would be in accord with the story.

There is one change I have made in the play that is a major one. The last woodcut is one of death, not of eternal life. This is, of course, my interpretation of Hrotwitha's play. I have tried to pose a question of the answer to which I am not sure. Is it enough that God rewarded Thais by taking her straight to heaven? That she went the author does not doubt, nor do I have any reason to. I question the penance for which God rewarded Thais. There seems to be such a parallel between Thais as a harlot misusing her body and Thais as a penitent, shut in her narrow cell, also misusing her body. The moral of the tale for Hrotswitha might be said to be that we are prisoners of our flesh at all times, only death can release us to a more satisfactory existence. The moral for me is that heaven is not of enough importance to negate the overwhelming fact of death as an end to a life in which the whole man is denied fulfillment.



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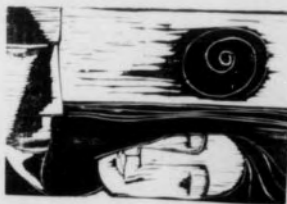
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